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Confirmation of Long-billed Wren Babbler *Rimator malacoptilus* in Nepal

JACK H. COX, JR.

A morning bird walk in east Nepal on 3 June 2009 produced a striking brown bird, subsequently identified as Long-billed Wren Babbler *Rimator malacoptilus*, at c.1,770 m on the north slope of Chitre Danda (= Chitre Ridge) (GPS coordinates: c.200 m east of 27°31.880'N 87°02.824'E) in the Sankhuwa Khola watershed, c.1 km south-west of Sigidim village, Bala Village Development Committee, Sankhuwasabha District. The area is located in Makalu-Barun Buffer Zone (MBBZ), which adjoins Makalu-Barun National Park (MBNP) to the south and east.

The bird was observed on two occasions and heard several times from 08h32 to 08h42. It appeared suddenly in a dim gap in the centre of a trailside thicket c.0.5 m from the periphery, and was initially observed for c.1 minute from a distance of 2.5 m using 10×42 binoculars. The bird then disappeared to a hidden perch in dense tangles, estimated by its singing (*per* Grimmett *et al.* 1998) to be 4–5 m away. After 3–4 minutes the bird

returned silently and unobtrusively to its initial perch for longer (3–4 minutes) views.

When first observed more or less laterally in dim light, dorsal plumage characters were clearly evident. The most immediate and striking feature was a long dark grey, slightly decurved bill (approximately the length of the head), giving the bird a top-heavy appearance. The brown upperparts were finely streaked with pale brown from the top of the head into the mantle. The uppertail, rump and wings were uniform brown, with no sign of spotting, streaking or barring. When the bird turned further to the side a stubby undertail was seen to be rufescent-brown, the brightest brown in the plumage. A dark moustachial stripe and indistinct malar stripe (Grimmett *et al.* 1998) went unnoticed before the bird flew away.

On return to its perch the bird was viewed for a second time through binoculars and by field assistant Birendra Rai. A more ventral aspect clearly showed most of its underparts. The throat appeared whitish; the centre of

the belly pale, tinged yellowish (buffy) and streaked heavily with wide long shafts of medium brown, which may also be rendered as thin pale buffy streaks against a brown background. Within 1 minute the bird puffed out its belly feathers, then preened itself for 2–3 minutes. The pale streaking on the belly was distinctly broader when the bird was preening. The vent was not seen well, owing mostly to the dim light and angle of view, but appeared to be darkish. The legs were not seen. The dorsal plumage appeared to be the same as when initially noted but a relatively pale face and indistinct moustachial stripe were evident when the bird turned its head while preening.

Mention of rufous coloration in the plumage is limited by Grimmett *et al.* (1998) to a rufous-brown vent and undertail-coverts, and by Collar (2006) to rusty-rufous thighs and vent. Collar & Robson (2007) state that the upperwing and tail are plain brown with a rufescent tinge, the face more rufescent and the rump slightly chestnut. Ali & Ripley (1987) detail even more rufescence: breast and abdomen pale rufescent-brown, flanks rufescent-brown and undertail-coverts ferruginous. Dim light surrounding the bird on Chitre Danda and observation angles likely obscured visibility of rufescence in the dorsal plumage (if present).

Otherwise, however, the observed set of plumage characters are entirely consistent with those reported by Ali & Ripley (1987), Grimmett *et al.* (1998) and Collar & Robson (2007) for Long-billed Wren Babbler and are exclusive to that species. In addition, its larger size compared with *Pnoepyga* wren babblers, fluffier appearance of underparts, behaviour, vocalisations and habitat further support this identification. Long-billed Wren Babbler was recently split into three species based on morphological affinities (Collar 2006). The population in north-west Tonkin was elevated to White-throated Wren Babbler *R. pasquieri* and the particularly disjunct population in western Sumatra to Sumatran Wren Babbler *R. albostrigatus*.

When first sighted, the bird seemed curious about my presence. After a few seconds it gave a rattling, churry alarm call several times. Alarm calls are reported as *prurr prurr prrit* or a quickly repeated *ker-wicket ker wicket* (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). One to two minutes later a whistled, fairly loud *pee-uh* call was heard four times at intervals of a few seconds. Heard (only?) at close range, the trailing *uh* was much softer and shorter. P. Morris in Grimmett *et al.* (1998) reported the song as a series of short clear bell-like whistles: *pee*, repeated every 3–4 seconds. Collar & Robson (2007) render the song as a short (0.4-second) clear whistle *chiiuuuh* or *fyeéér*, smoothly falling in pitch but gaining in volume and given every 2–10 seconds. The bird did not respond to my imitations of its *pee-uh* call, and after 3–4 minutes of close-range observations it disappeared silently and unobtrusively through thickets. Ali & Ripley (1987) neatly summarise the general behaviour of the species: ‘a great skulker; though fearless and allowing a very close approach, it excels in keeping unseen and it is extremely difficult to follow its movements for more than a brief instant’.

The habitat at the site was a somewhat open ravine of dense tangled thickets (shrubs with cascading lianas and dead branches), *ningalo* (*Arundinaria* sp.), scattered *malingo* (*Arundinaria* sp.), and tall herbaceous ground cover of nettles, fern and *Eupatorium* sp., set in dense subtropical mixed broadleaf forest on steep slopes with a dense understorey. Nearby trees were fairly tall with mossy trunks

and limbs, and lianas were profuse on forest-edge trees, but few epiphytes. *Hibiscus* sp. was prevalent in the area as a short tree and shrub. The patch of shrubs and thickets apparently was formed by succession of an old landslip or, less likely, from tree cutting (>5?) years ago (no stumps were discernible). The weather was clear and calm and the temperature was c.24°C in the shade.

Long-billed Wren Babbler is distributed mainly as a scarce resident in the eastern Himalayas of India and Bhutan (Ali & Ripley 1987, Collar & Robson 2007) but has been reported in recent years from China in north-western Yunnan (Collar & Robson 2007), and several localities in northern Myanmar: Pyepat ridge somewhere between 1,675 m and 2,135 m in the N’Mai Hka drainage (Smythies 1949, 2001), Shinshanku in February 2001 (J. Rappole *in press*), Naung Mung in March 2001 or March 2004 (S. Renner *in litt.* 2010) and Namdudong at c.1,830 m on 31 January 2007 (J. W. Duckworth *in litt.* 2010).

On the subcontinent, the ecological requirements, breeding and behaviour of Long-billed Wren Babbler are poorly known. It is a rare resident at moderate elevations (c.1,500 m) in Sikkim, favouring dense scrub in disturbed forests and abandoned clearings (Ali 1962). In Bhutan and the Indian Himalayas (Miri Hills of Northeast Frontier Agency; Kasi, Cacar and Mizo Hills of Assam; Manipur), the species is scarce, residing in forest undergrowth and dense scrub in steep broken country at 900–2,700 m (Ali & Ripley 1987). The substantial range in altitude allows for the possibility that the species undertakes seasonal movements (Cox & Sherpa 1998).

A specimen of Long-billed Wren Babbler without locality data was obtained by B. Hodgson in the mid-nineteenth century while he was stationed at Darjeeling, India (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991). The skin was included in his second collection of Nepalese birds, but a catalogue he subsequently annotated suggests that skins of several species known from the eastern Himalayas probably came from India (Cocker & Inskipp 1988). This information led Grimmett *et al.* (2000) to exclude Long-billed Wren Babbler from their field guide to the birds of Nepal.

A sighting of a single Long-billed Wren Babbler was verbally reported by my field assistant, Chundak Sherpa, who was close by me while trekking on 20 April 1995 c.3 km north of Punggum village at 3,260 m on Zattara Danda along the western border of MBNP (Cox & Sherpa 1998). Details of the record are repeated here owing to the obscurity of the original publication: a single issue of a defunct regional journal. Sherpa was afforded a brief unobscured and unaided observation of a small brown stubby-tailed bird perched on a mossy boulder c.5 m off a crestline trail on a rugged ridge in dense mixed rhododendron forest, amongst clumps of dense bamboo undergrowth (mostly dead from recent flowering), ferns and boulders. He tried to alert me to its presence, but the bird flew away silently before I could view it (Cox & Sherpa 1998). Sherpa reported that the bird resembled Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga pusilla* and Pygmy Wren Babbler *P. albiventer*, with which he was familiar, but differed strikingly by a long decurved bill, approximately the length of the head. Also, unlike those two species, the upper back was prominently streaked with pale brown. The underparts were not discernible from Sherpa’s angle of view except for a whitish throat. The bird appeared more rounded and puffed out compared to the two

Pnoepyga species, but the short wings and weak short flight near the ground were very similar (Cox & Sherpa 1998).

Taken together, the observed characters were considered diagnostic by the authors and the editor of *Ibisbill*. However, objections raised by subcontinental bird authorities regarding the observer as a non-ornithologist, the record's particularly important status as a new species for Nepal, its unusually high altitude and relatively far western location in Nepal (c. 125 km from the border with Sikkim) have resulted in the record remaining unaccepted.

My new record from Chitre Danda c. 105 km from the Sikkim border confirms Long-billed Wren Babbler for Nepal, probably as a resident. Chitre Danda harbours an unusually dense and seemingly bird-species rich tract of moist temperate and subtropical forests in Nepal. J. Bland (*in litt.* 2004) assessed the diversity and habitat associations of birds along a gradient of forest disturbance on Chitre Danda from 1992 to 1995 and recorded 230 species within 2 km of Chitre village. The remoteness of the area and wet conditions caused by proximity to high mountains have limited conversion for agriculture and grazing, especially on north slopes. Subtropical forests in particular retain a dense understorey that is generally lacking in this forest type elsewhere in Nepal (pers. obs.). Similarly intact tracts may exist, however, in poorly explored upper reaches of the Arun and Tamur watersheds. These areas may contain suitable habitat for Long-billed Wren Babbler and, as at Chitre Danda, additional Eastern Himalaya species collected by Hodgson and initially listed as coming from Nepal.

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of the species in Myanmar. Field assistants Rajan Kumar Rai, Birendra Rai, Badri Rai and Rajan (Yogesh) Rai provided key logistical support to access Chitre Danda and other areas of interest in east Nepal.

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We are sorry to report the death of Jack Cox between the acceptance and publication of this note. Pdfs are available from mail@orientalbirdclub.org.

Radio-frequency chaff in a nest of Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*

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Swifts are aerial birds with highly specialised morphology for aerial foraging habits and high speed flight (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999). They require open areas with adequate concentrations of aerial plankton, which consists of a wide variety of insects and arachnids (Chantler & Driessens 1995, del Hoyo *et al.* 1999). During the breeding season, not only their food but also nesting materials are typically collected from airborne detritus (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999).

Among the four species of swift reported from Korea, Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus* is the most common, being an

abundant summer visitor to coastal areas and islands of the Peninsula (Lee *et al.* 2000, Choi *et al.* 2009), but little is known about its breeding biology and nest materials owing to the limited accessibility of its nests on cliffs. On 10 July 2008, just after the fledging of two young swifts, we collected the nest of a Pacific Swift (*A. p. pacificus*) in a horizontal crevice of a sheer coastal cliff exposing sedimentary rock layers on Chilbaldo Islet (34°47'N 125°47'E), Jeonnam province, Republic of Korea. The height of the nest and cliff were 50 m and 125 m above sea